

MONOLITH CAVE UPDATE

ROCKCASTLE COUNTY, KENTUCKY

BY GARY O'DELL

On January 2, 1988 a survey and reconnaissance trip was made to Monolith Cave in Rockcastle County, with Gary O'Dell and Jon Hagee.

This was the first trip to Monolith since the summer of 1986; at that time all known passage (except about 200 feet of miserable stream crawl) had been surveyed and the exploration lost momentum. The total passage surveyed was about 2,800 feet. There were, however, several promising leads, and the situation of Monolith has potential for a major cave system. This trip was to push several of those leads and add footage to the survey.

The first lead was a faintly blowing crawl that had earlier been investigated on several trips. A major trunk passage ends abruptly at a collapse pile. It was hoped that an extension of the passage might be found beyond the breakdown. The crawl was penetrated on this January trip for about twenty feet beyond previous exploration, but was blocked ultimately by a thin vertical slab of cemented breakdown. The crawl continues past, unreachable at this time.

The primary objective of the trip was to push beyond the Missile Silo dome pit into the C-Survey, where the best remaining lead was to be found. This lead is rather difficult to reach, requiring several climbs. The first climb is a twenty-foot chimney down from the main level to the foyer canyon of the Missile Silo. The bottom of the Missile Silo is reached by a twenty-five foot two-step drop. A ladder had been constructed in late 1985 to facilitate this, as the first part of the drop can be chimneyed. On this trip it was discovered that the ladder had been moved away from the ledge, so that it was necessary to rappel down.

There had been reports from a recent a volume of space estimated at forty feet high, sixty feet wide, and a hundred feet long.

During the trip, explorations in this maze finally discovered a stream or streams at the bottom of the collapse, a small canyon about four feet square in cross-section. The canyon is frequently interrupted by breakdown so that only small sections, ten or fifteen feet, can be seen at one time. One must climb back up through the confusing boulder pile and try to figure out where to locate and how to reach the next segment (which of innumerable holes to squeeze down through, and can you climb back up again?).

There is rather an ominous feel to this maze, as though it were waiting poised to make a caver sandwich between two slabs of limestone. After a few minutes poking around in here, the caver suddenly decides that he does not want to be caving solo in any portion, and just where the hell is his companion?

None of the many large blocks seem inclined to move, though, and much of the smaller stuff has been cemented together. There is a lot of small material that will slide. Explorations in here should be made with at least two cavers together at all times, and proceed with great care throughout. In a maze such as this, an injured caver might not be reached.

sport trip to the cave that the ladder had deteriorated and was unsafe. Close examination showed that the ladder was sound and bore no evidence of decay or even discoloration despite the constant rain of water from the dome. It had been constructed of pressure-preservative treated lumber with galvanized nails. The ladder should have several years of useful life remaining, but all visitors to the cave are cautioned to test it first regardless.

The C-Survey can only be reached from the bottom of the pit, but it is fifteen feet up the slick vertical wall of the dome. Here again the ladder was used, moved a few feet to this otherwise inaccessible passage.

The C-Survey begins as a walking passage six to eight feet high and four wide, but after a hundred or so feet becomes a low canyon stoopway. Finally it breaks out into an area of intersecting joints that have formed tall narrow canyons and an extensive breakdown maze. Our main lead, a canyon thirty feet high and two wide, quickly dwindled to only inches in width and covered with masses of razor-edged popcorn. A lonely survey shot of sixteen feet was placed, and then attention turned to the breakdown maze.

This maze is a formidable place, making even the Malfunction Junction of Miller's Cave seem simplistic. Much of it is unstable, and filled with passages that begin and end, holes and levels and leads everywhere. It has not yet been possible to determine the extent of this maze, either vertical or horizontal, nor in fact even which direction it is going!

It is most likely that it is aligned north-south with the ridge and that this major collapse area is where the trunk passes beneath a minor surface ravine. A topographic overlay with the cave map indicates that this may be so. The penetrated portion, greatly extended on this most recent trip, encompasses

The direction of streamflow was deeper into the collapse area. To us this is a hopeful sign.

The next step in our investigations will be ridge-running above Monolith Cave and the approximately fifty acres of outcrop and terrace that have not yet been checked. Some such investigation, of a minor nature, was made in 1985 and found several sinks. It may be possible to bypass the collapse and pick up the dry upper trunk from another entrance. Just Another Rat Cave (JARC) approaches to within thirty feet of the breakdown maze, but entry from here seems doubtful due to the minute passage size at the end of JARC. There are numerous small caves and blowing holes in the Ste. Genevieve/Upper Member outcrop, and several springs at the base of the hillslope that flow into Crooked Creek.

The ridge we have been investigating since 1985 is close to those containing Goochland and Smokehole Caves. Monolith Cave itself approaches one of these caves within a distance of five hundred feet. The dry upper trunk in Monolith may be analogous to those in the former two caves. The possibility exists that the ridge contains a cave system of equal magnitude with the former two caverns, though this system may be fragmented and separated by areas of collapse.